

World Order Politics

If my people shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.

II Chronicles 7:14

For a quarter century, Cold War bombast defined the presidential inaugural. Harry Truman in 1949 devoted his to repudiating the “false philosophy” of Communism. Eisenhower, in 1953, pitted “freedom . . . against slavery; lightness against the dark.” Yet, whereas John F. Kennedy promised to “bear any burden” on liberty’s behalf, Jimmy Carter admitted only a “clear-cut preference” for societies that shared American values. Carter’s inaugural characterized the Cold War not as an existential struggle but in terms of technical challenges: how to control the “massive armaments race” and achieve “the elimination of nuclear weapons.” “Not so many years ago,” one Carter adviser wrote, “things were much simpler.” “The enemy was World Communism,” and “the rest of the countries of the world were put in two categories—either for us or against us.” By the late 1970s, the bipolar dichotomies were wearing thin, and the United States faced “a more complex world” without the clarity that the Cold War once provided.¹

Still, the Cold War’s ideological clarity looked, in retrospect, to have produced murky outcomes, at least in the eyes of the new president. His predecessors had erred in the world, Carter acknowledged, and their errors had embroiled the United States in quagmires, notably Vietnam. In the future, Carter promised, “we will not behave in foreign lands so as to violate our rules and standards.” A religious man, Carter had planned to include in his address a blunt scriptural passage, II Chronicles 7:14. His political instincts countermanding his spiritual ones, he ended up using verses from Micah emphasizing guidance and mercy, not contrition and repentance. Humility was nonetheless the inauguration’s motif. Carter’s decision to forsake the presidential limousine and walk from the Capitol to the White House marked his desire to reduce what he called

“the imperial status of the president.” In symbolic and substantive ways, Carter sought to curtail an imperial presidency that was, in key respects, a Cold War creation.²

Locating himself in a moment of change, Carter evoked a vague but constructive agenda for a world that “a new spirit” was awakening. Drawing from Zbigniew Brzezinski, he made human rights a guiding principle and a concomitant of vast historical changes. “Peoples more numerous and . . . politically aware,” Carter declared, were “craving” and “demanding” their “basic human rights.” As a nation dedicated to liberty, the United States had a particular responsibility to “shape” a world order hospitable to human freedom. What Carter meant by this was not what Cold Warriors meant when they juxtaposed American freedom against Soviet slavery. Their version of freedom was a line in the geopolitical sands; his was an ideal to which the United States must aspire. Human rights would be his lodestar. But Carter did not declare an ideological crusade to impose human rights on recalcitrant regimes; on the contrary, he committed himself to seek a “mature perspective on the problems of the world.”³

Beyond exercising restraint, the United States, the new president insisted, would have to engage the challenges of an integrating, interdependent world. In a parallel inaugural address broadcast via satellite to a global audience, Carter identified some of these. Human rights promotion, nuclear nonproliferation, and global environmental stewardship, Carter explained, were priorities for changing circumstances. “We Americans,” he declared, “have concluded one chapter in our nation’s history and are beginning to work on another.” What Carter evoked was, in essence, the need to formulate a post–Cold War foreign policy for a post–Cold War world.⁴



The Carter administration, as one aide put it, committed itself to making “the world safe for interdependence.” The only Democrat to occupy the White House between 1969 and 1993, Carter embraced a conception of “world order politics” that enjoyed wide support in his party and drew upon his experiences with the Trilateral Commission. What Carter attempted as president was novel in relation to his Cold War forebears but exemplary of contemporary ideas. Trilateralism, one observer wrote, was by the mid-1970s “almost the consensus position” among the foreign-policy elite. Still, if Carter proceeded from assumptions quite different from those that had animated his predecessors eight years earlier, he built upon their legacies, especially in international economic cooperation. He would, moreover, end up adapting his initial strategic priorities to circumstances more complex than he initially perceived, much as they had done after the shock of the oil crisis.⁵

This chapter first follows the evolution of Carter's post-Cold War foreign policy. While Carter often struggled to articulate it, his administration followed a more coherent strategy than historians have often allowed, one deriving from assumptions about history as well as from ethical commitments. Carter and his advisers, this chapter explains, coalesced around world order politics, in which human rights were a central tenet. After defining the premises of Carter's foreign policy, the chapter moves to the implementation, beginning with the administration's efforts to invigorate a sluggish but interdependent global economy through international policy coordination. These efforts culminated in the Bonn Economic Summit of 1978, a landmark in policy coordination that failed to resolve the structural challenges facing the industrialized countries. Last, this chapter turns to Carter's efforts to assimilate human rights into US diplomacy. Reconciling human rights to competing priorities proved challenging, more so in some contexts than in others. Iran, it concludes, was an especially difficult case.⁶

After 1978, Carter's post-Cold War strategy unraveled. Coordination among the industrialized countries failed to overcome the structural obstacles to international economic governance, while the predicament of the global economy worsened as the world descended into a second energy crisis that hinged on events in Iran. Meanwhile, tensions with the Soviet Union resurged, a consequence in part of the administration's schizoid East-West policy, prompting Carter to resurrect older notions of anti-Soviet containment. Still, the subsequent retreat from world order politics, toward a looser strategic *mélange*, should obscure neither the originality nor the coherence of what Carter attempted at the outset.

“To Make the World Safe for Interdependence”

The thirty-seventh president of the United States was born outside Plains, Georgia, in 1924. His rural upbringing gave him scant introduction to public affairs, but Jimmy Carter acquired in his youth a strong religious commitment and a dislike for racial oppression. His education at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, and his subsequent naval service offered experience of the world and an exhibition of presidential power, when Harry Truman in 1948 desegregated the US military and the submarine on which Carter served. Truman's example left an impression, but after leaving the Navy in 1953, Carter returned to Plains, where he and his wife Rosalynn took over the family business, a peanut farm and warehouse and a store. He became active in state politics in the 1960s, winning an improbable 1970 bid for the Georgia governorship.⁷

As governor, Carter personified the aspirations of the New South. He traveled abroad and solicited international opportunities for Georgia businesses. Carter's intellectual depth, internationalist orientation, and political gifts brought him to the attention of the Trilateral Commission. The responsibilities of the Georgia governorship, meanwhile, drove him to contemplate the impact that external events were having on American society. In the wake of the 1973–74 oil crisis, Carter studied energy issues with particular care. Influenced by such thinkers as Alvin Toffler and Robert Theobald, he became convinced that long-term energy security depended on conservation and international policy coordination. Writing to Zbigniew Brzezinski in 1973, he urged the application of "our trilateral approach to the energy question." Unlike Nixon and Kissinger, whose worldviews were forged in the high Cold War, Carter began thinking about international relations at a time when the problems of an interdependent world loomed large. This formative experience would shape his agenda as president.⁸

When Carter became president, no candidate from the Deep South had won election since Reconstruction, and no governor had become president since FDR. In the era of the Cold War, the American people looked to the Senate for leadership, believing that senators alone possessed the "knowledge and experience in foreign affairs" that equipped them to lead. This was the conclusion of Hamilton Jordan, one of Carter's closest aides. Jordan was nonetheless upbeat in his assessment of Carter's prospects. "In choosing a president," Jordan wrote in 1972, "we are no longer looking for a man to lead the Free World in its fight against international Communism." Carter could run as an outsider who would restore integrity, not as a seasoned Cold Warrior. Carter's victories in the early primaries enabled him to prevail against his rivals for the Democratic nomination, and he achieved a modest victory over Gerald Ford in November 1976.⁹

As president, Carter surrounded himself with aides from his home state. Jordan led the White House Staff. Jody Powell, another young Georgian, served as press secretary. Critics sniped that the White House staff was "plucked from the Georgia backwoods." The national security team, on the other hand, showed the imprint of Trilateral Commission. Zbigniew Brzezinski became national security adviser. Cyrus Vance, who had served at Defense under Lyndon Johnson, became the secretary of state. To lead the Department of Defense, Carter selected Harold Brown, the president of Caltech. Michael Blumenthal, a businessman with a PhD in economics, became the secretary of the treasury. Beneath them, the foreign policy bureaucracy bulged with talent. One future secretary of state, Warren Christopher, served under Vance; another, Madeline Albright, went to work for Brzezinski. International economics was a particular strength, with Richard Cooper and C. Fred Bergsten serving at the State Department. Joseph Nye, the theorist of interdependence, went to the Defense Department, while political scientist Samuel Huntington consulted for the

NSC. Experienced diplomats, including Richard Holbrooke and Tony Lake, also joined the administration.¹⁰



The formulation of a foreign policy agenda preceded the election. Early strategic concepts bore the imprint of Carter's main campaign advisers: Brzezinski, Richard Gardner, and Henry Owen, all of whom were enthusiastic Trilateralists. It was Gardner, an international lawyer, who declared making "the world safe for interdependence" to be the task of US foreign policy. Attentive to North-South issues as well as to relations among the industrial countries, Gardner called for a phase of institutional construction to renovate the machinery of international order. Others offered similar perspectives. Henry Owen, an economist and diplomat, joined Carter's NSC, where he assumed special responsibility for the G-7 summits. For Owen, the imperatives of international policy coordination marked the historical obsolescence of economic sovereignty. "The modern nation-state," Owen wrote in 1973, "is not adequate to the needs of the day." With Brzezinski, Gardner, and Owen drafted the blueprint for the new administration's strategic concept. "The depth, extent, and pace of global change," they wrote, "is ushering us into a new era of either global cooperation or fragmentation."¹¹

Locating themselves in the cusp of change, Carter and his advisers presumed that the postwar era in international relations was ending. Carter made this point in a landmark campaign speech to the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. America's "old postwar monopolies of economic resource[s] and industrial power," he explained in March 1976, "have been swept aside." The Pax Americana, in other words, was over, and the Cold War order was receding. Accordingly, a bipolar concept of the international system would no longer suffice to guide American foreign policy. It was time, Brzezinski, Gardner, and Owen advised, to "initiate a new phase in U.S. foreign policy going beyond the Atlanticist / East-West Cold War framework of the years 1945–1976." "Balance of power politics," Carter declared on the campaign, "must be supplemented by world order politics."¹²

World order politics proceeded from the assumptions that technological modernization was contracting space and time; that transnational relations were rendering nation-states interdependent, if not obsolete; and that mass literacy and mass media were globalizing human aspirations, producing what Brzezinski called a "global political awakening." "Our point of departure," Brzezinski explained, "is the view that we are living in a time in which the world is experiencing the most extensive and the most intensive transformation in its entire history." The challenge for the United States, still *primus inter pares* among nation-states, was to orchestrate an international order in which "the entire international community," North, South, East, and West could participate. Doing this required embracing interdependence. First came the enhancement

and deepening of “our collaboration with our friends in the industrial world.” This would facilitate a second objective, which was to expand opportunities “for the new emerging states to enhance, through self-reliance, their own internal progress.” In a third purpose, the Carter administration would involve the Communist countries in its world order concept. “We shall seek cooperation with the communist countries, while striving to reduce areas of conflict.”¹³

Cold Warriors divided the globe into East and West; dependency theorists, into a core and a periphery; Mao Zedong into First, Second, and Third. The Carter administration, for its part, recognized just one world, an outlook that aligned it with the teleological assumptions of what would in the 1980s become known as globalization. The Trilateralists hoped to reconcile the USSR to their one-world concept, but deciding what to do about détente was a dilemma. Détente had quieted Cold War tensions, enabling post-Cold War issues to stake their claim on the foreign-policy agenda, but when critics assailed détente’s weakness and immorality it proved hard, as Kissinger had found, to defend its accomplishments. During the election campaign, Carter declared that he favored détente in principle but not the compromises necessary to sustain it. As president, it would be harder to have it both ways, especially while downgrading superpower relations relative to other priorities. Carter sought to move US foreign policy beyond the Cold War–centrism of recent decades, but Soviet-American relations could not be disregarded, especially since some of Carter’s world order objectives involved the Soviet Union.

The road to progress on nuclear arms control passed through Moscow. Whereas Kissinger had stabilized the arms race for geopolitical purposes, reducing nuclear arsenals was for Carter a moral commitment—and a defining preoccupation. “We had to do everything possible to stop this mad race,” he explained. Carter declared his desire to abolish nuclear weapons when he announced his candidacy for president, when he accepted the Democratic Party’s nomination, and in his inaugural address. Whereas nuclear arms had in the high Cold War been sentinels of the West’s security, Carter designated the weapons themselves the threat and invited the Soviet Union to join with Washington to control them. Acknowledging that it had been “a major theme” of the campaign, Carter’s transition team made nuclear arms control a high priority. Ted Sorensen, an informal adviser to the new president, urged Carter to pursue global nuclear disarmament, holding out the prospect of a Nobel Peace Prize. Carter did not need the encouragement; his own instincts made nonproliferation an overarching objective and arms control a priority for East-West relations.¹⁴



Human rights, another issue deriving from ethical commitments, became the most distinctive, acclaimed, and contentious of the administration’s early

priorities. Not a major theme in the early phase of Carter's presidential campaign, human rights became a central focus in 1976. As Carter framed them, human rights were the centerpiece of the American historical project and a transcendent idea toward which the United States must strive. Human rights were the birthright of all peoples, but Americans had a "special responsibility" to promote them. Thus convinced, Carter was himself the central figure in his administration's pursuit of human rights. "It is the President's personal feelings that form the core of our 'policy,'" wrote one NSC staffer. As speechwriter Jim Fallows saw it, Carter's motives were "not particularly complicated." The president believed in human rights "very strongly" and sought to advance their cause, at home and in the world.¹⁵

A self-described born-again Baptist, Carter maintained a wall of separation between his own religious convictions and the work of government. But if religion shaped Carter's ethics, which animated his human rights commitments, direct connections between Carter's religiosity and his human rights policy are difficult to trace. More directly influential were his experiences as a racial liberal in the Jim Crow South. The achievements of the civil rights movement had taught Carter that federal power could achieve progressive change where local authorities resisted it. Desegregation, he explained, was "something that had to be forced on us from outside." The analogy suggested that the international community might have to impose human rights on nation-states, much as the federal government had imposed civil rights on the South. The appointment of Patricia Derian, a former civil rights activist, as the assistant secretary of state for human rights made the connection between civil rights and human rights implicit. Speaking at the University of Georgia, Cyrus Vance made it unambiguous. "In the early years of our civil rights movement, many Americans treated the issue as a 'Southern' problem," Vance explained. "Now as a nation we must not make a comparable mistake. Protection of human rights is a challenge for all countries."¹⁶

If human rights built upon national accomplishments, they also offered a kind of absolution after the sins of Vietnam. Indeed, "human rights" and "morality in foreign policy" were substantially overlapping categories for Jimmy Carter. This had implications for the practice of human rights diplomacy. But, as laudable as the ends might be, the means mattered to the new president. A follower of Reinhold Niebuhr who nonetheless rejected Niebuhr's differentiation between the moralities of statecraft and of ordinary life, Carter heeded the philosopher's caution that moral zealousness should not precipitate unrighteous action.¹⁷

Zbigniew Brzezinski considered Carter's human rights to be "more embedded in morality and religion than in geopolitics and strategy." For Brzezinski, the reverse was true. Brzezinski perceived that historical changes were making

human beings more politically engaged, more sensitive to inequality and injustice, and more aware of their position in the global order. “Throughout the world,” he explained, “because of higher literacy, better communications and a closer sense of interdependence, people are demanding and asserting their basic rights.” Human rights were an answer to this worldwide political awakening; by embracing them, the United States would align itself with historical change and seize a new leadership role in an integrating world. This is not to say that Brzezinski’s embrace of human rights was cynical; he joined Amnesty International USA in its fledgling days and maintained close connections with Freedom House, the New York-based NGO. But if Carter’s human rights were a transcendent idea residing beyond history, Brzezinski’s existed within an auspicious historical moment. “An idea whose historic time has come,” Brzezinski declared, human rights were “the genuine historical inevitability of our time.” This conviction fused with Carter’s ethical commitments to make human rights the master key to the administration’s initial strategic project.¹⁸



Issue by issue, the continuities between the Ford and the Carter administrations’ foreign policies were clearer than the differences. When it came to the Soviet Union, the Carter administration talked human rights but sought to uphold détente. China policy remained stable, in the limbo it had been in since 1972. Renewing cooperation among the industrialized countries was a central focus, but here the new administration built on Ford’s legacy. The differences between the administrations resided in the grand design, not the details.

Although Carter proceeded from a coherent strategic outlook, he struggled to communicate his guiding vision to the American people. Two months into his presidency, Brzezinski advised Carter that public support for particular foreign-policy initiatives was high. There was “considerable appreciation” for Carter’s commitment to arms control and “remarkably widespread support” for human rights. But Americans were missing the big picture. “I do not believe,” Brzezinski wrote, “that at this stage the larger design of what you wish to accomplish has emerged with sufficiently sharp relief.” To remedy the problem, he urged Carter to articulate “a more coherent vision of his grand strategy.” Carter decided to give a major speech outlining his agenda and priorities. It was appropriate, given the centrality of human rights in Carter’s strategic outlook, that the speech chosen for this purpose had been slated to deal with that issue alone. Carter now requested from his speechwriter a broader statement of strategic purposes, which is what he delivered to the Notre Dame class of 1977.¹⁹

At Notre Dame, Carter declared that the Soviet Union was no longer a “unifying threat.” Instead, the United States would have to align its policy with the new reality of globalization. “We must respond to the new reality of a politically

awakening world,” he explained. Having gestured at the big picture, Carter itemized his objectives. He would pursue arms control with the Soviet Union and nuclear nonproliferation on a global scale; he would expand cooperation with Western Europe and Japan; and he would reintegrate China into the world, while seeking majority rule in South Africa. The priorities were diverse, but a conceptual thread stitched the patchwork together. His strategic purpose, Carter explained, was “to create a wider framework of international cooperation suited to the new and rapidly changing historical circumstances.” With this, the Trilateralists assumed for themselves the responsibility of governance and, with it, the opportunity to refashion American foreign policy according to their own design.²⁰

Reactions were mixed. The *New York Times* applauded Carter’s commitment to an enlightened foreign policy but expressed concern about how he would translate his lofty aspirations into practical solutions. “His diagnosis of our posture was splendid,” the paper’s editorialists wrote. “His prescription for our conduct remains to be defined.”²¹

Indeed, what Carter formulated at Notre Dame was a conceptual framework, not an outline of workable policy solutions. Carter’s shortcomings were not those of his predecessor’s. Eight years earlier, Nixon and Kissinger had devised a concept for stabilizing the Cold War and, with it, the Pax Americana, but their grand strategy did not account for the ways in which forces exogenous to the realm of geopolitics were transforming world politics. Carter and Brzezinski devised a looser strategy, and it proceeded from the assumption that the strategist must accommodate history, not the reverse. Still, moving from conceptualization to implementation proved to be tricky. Tensions between domestic and international purposes would thwart the administration’s efforts to manage economic interdependence, while divergences of interest stymied cooperation within the G-7. When it came to human rights, domestic audiences were enthusiastic, but the crusade elicited strong reactions abroad. The Carter administration struggled to balance its idealism with a broad portfolio of interests, which included the sustenance of détente. It nonetheless cleaved for eighteen months to its initial vision of a post-Cold War politics, only shifting its priorities as the difficulties mounted.

Trilateralism in Practice

On its surface, the economic outlook for 1977 was not so dire as Jimmy Carter had suggested on the campaign trail when he accused the Ford administration of owning “the worst economic record since the Depression.” The US economy

had, in fact, performed reasonably well after Ford pirouetted in early 1975 from fighting inflation to stimulating growth. GDP grew by over 5 percent in 1976. Still, growth slowed during the year, and unemployment remained high, reaching 7.6 percent in the fourth quarter. In most other industrialized countries, prospects looked worse. By 1977, talk of a “pause” in the post-1974 recovery was widespread. More serious than the short-term outlook were the structural challenges that the capitalist world confronted. Governments appeared unable to manage their economies as they had in the 1950s and 1960s; they now struggled to produce growth and full employment, dual commitments for the West’s welfare states. Stimulus initiatives in the mid-1970s were exacerbating inflation without reducing unemployment, to the chagrin of Keynesian economists who had long presumed a negative correlation between these evil twins of macroeconomics.²²

Interdependence was part of the problem. Formulated within a bounded concept of national economic space, Keynesian theory held that stimulating demand through tax cuts, public spending, and cheap money would correct cyclical downturns and bolster employment. By the 1970s, however, transnational economic relations had become so thick that most advanced industrial countries were no longer economies unto themselves. This made economic governance more challenging—and less predictable—than Keynesian theory presumed. In a globalizing world, economic stimulus in one country but not elsewhere could lead to disruptive and destabilizing capital flows. Yet the dilemmas for economic governance in the 1970s were also a consequence of structural changes deep within the West’s capitalist economies.²³

Beneath the drama of the oil crisis, waning economic productivity and falling rates of profit made a return to high postwar growth rates improbable. After 1973, US labor productivity increased by 1.7 percent per year, half what its growth averaged between 1948 and 1966. The causes of this slowdown were complex: the oil shocks set productivity back, but declining capital investment, diminishing returns on innovation, and the service sector’s ascent all contributed to the slippage as well. Meanwhile, the pool of surplus agricultural labor that had long nourished economic growth was running dry; “since the late 1960s,” the Council of Economic Advisers warned, the “shift out of agriculture has slowed, and productivity growth from this source has been much reduced.” If postwar growth had been extensive, based upon the addition of factors within a stable techno-industrial paradigm, future gains would have to be intensive, which meant making existing factors of production more productive. Economic growth would, as a result, be slower in the future than it had been in the past, and it would have to come from improvements in productivity now that the abundant inputs of energy and labor that had sustained high rates of extensive growth in the 1950s and 1960s were expiring.²⁴

The ebbing of recovery in the last quarter of 1976 made restoring growth both a political priority and a transcendent challenge. In its absence loomed distributive struggles and even political instability; for postwar policymakers, it was axiomatic that growth salved the social conflicts that had plagued prewar capitalism. Now that growth had ebbed, policymakers agreed on the imperative of restoring it but not how to achieve its restoration. Ford and his advisers had gambled that price stability, deregulation, and government austerity would restore private-sector productivity. These solutions prefigured Reaganomics in the 1980s, but in general market-oriented solutions did not dominate the policy arena. Democrats in the Congress and in the Carter administration, entertained rather different ideas about how to rejuvenate growth.²⁵

While the neoliberals advocated rolling back the state, some Democrats favored expanding the federal government's economic role to include the microeconomic management of industries. In 1975, Hubert Humphrey and Jacob Javits, two powerful US senators with strong ties to organized labor, proposed creating a national planning board. The initiative won the support of progressive economists, such as John Kenneth Galbraith and Wassily Leontief, who argued that restoring growth required government involvement in planning and allocation as well as restrictions on the international movement of trade and capital. Microeconomic managerialism, sometimes characterized as "industrial policy," commanded enthusiasm on the Democratic Party's left.²⁶

Although Carter saluted Humphrey and Javits on the campaign trail, the president's instincts led him to favor deregulation, not industrial policies. The tariffs and controls on which industrial policies would depend were, moreover, difficult to square with Carter's Trilateralist commitments to keep the world economy open. "Tariffs, export subsidies, industrial policy, privileged treatment," concluded a Trilateral Commission report, "threaten the systems of interaction and interdependence which are a source of prosperity in the industrial world." Committed to internationalizing economic governance and to keeping world markets open, the Carter administration rejected both the left's microeconomics of managerialism and the right's microeconomics of the market. It persevered instead with the macroeconomic solutions that US policymakers had favored since the 1950s. An early stimulus package aimed to promote growth through tax cuts and grants to local government. Framed domestically, the stimulus was a predictable move. More innovative was its projection upon a transnational scale.²⁷

Having assumed office inclined to Trilateralist cooperation and macroeconomic stimulus, the Carter administration found in the G-7 summits a vehicle for policy coordination. As before, the initiative emerged elsewhere. It was Valéry Giscard d'Estaing who, in late 1976, proposed the next summit, pointing to the "developing division" between the strong and the weak economies

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within the G-7 as a “concrete” problem that the group should address. Britain, Italy, and France were flagging at the end of 1976, while Japan, Germany, and the United States were doing rather better. British officials had long advocated an international stimulus program, but their appeals had swayed neither Bonn nor Washington. Attitudes now looked to be changing. The Brookings Institution put out a report in late 1976 calling for a coordinated international stimulus. The logic of the proposal was that the strong countries would stimulate their economies and lift global demand, while the weaker countries would hold firm against price inflation. Known as the “locomotive theory,” it gave Germany, Japan, and the United States special responsibility for pulling the industrialized world into recovery.²⁸

The Carter administration embraced the locomotive. When Secretary Blumenthal went to Congress to defend the Carter domestic stimulus package, he linked it to international objectives, urging legislators to help the White House to foster “a better international economic climate.” Vice President Mondale traveled to Europe to build support for the initiative, finding the British enthusiastic but the Germans wary. Helmut Schmidt acknowledged the utility of an “internationally concerted economic policy” but declared that his priority was fighting inflation, which in 1977 averaged almost 10 percent across the G-7 economies. Stimulus, the chancellor feared, would only exacerbate rising prices. Still, with the United States now leading the stimulus camp, Schmidt had cause to feel isolated. When the G-7 had last convened, Ford had sided with Schmidt, but the change in administrations, along with mounting concerns about the US balance of payments, led Washington to switch sides.²⁹

Crucially, getting Germany and Japan to stimulate their economies would enable the Carter administration to pursue expansionary domestic policies without exacerbating the US balance of payments deficit. The locomotive nonetheless followed a grand strategic logic. Echoing Kissinger, the Trilateralists warned that “bleak economic prospects” in Europe and Japan would breed protectionism and instability. Restoring growth would secure social and political stability and keep the world economy open. Success nonetheless required collective action. Convinced that “economic interdependence has become a fact of international life,” the Carter administration presumed that effective economic stimulus had to be coordinated; if the industrialized countries pursued divergent policies, they would fail in tandem. This made the next G-7 summit the administration’s “most important foreign policy action,” in Brzezinski’s assessment. After “a protracted period of political stagnation and economic decline,” a successful summit, Brzezinski predicted, could be the historical “turning point” that restored the West’s confidence, prosperity, and purpose.³⁰

The planning began months before the G-7 convened in London. Seeing the summit not as an informal seminar, as Giscard had construed the Rambouillet

summit, but as an exercise in collaborative decision-making, US officials focused on the communiqué that would conclude the summit. Henry Owen represented Carter in the preparatory talks, working to steer them toward favored US goals. Besides coordinating stimulus efforts, these goals included expanding the IMF's lending resources and recommitting the G-7 to trade liberalization. Achieving shared commitments to nuclear nonproliferation, energy conservation, and Third World aid were also US priorities. Germany cautioned against inflation and trade imbalances, concerns that reflected its dependence on exports. North-South relations were another priority for Helmut Schmidt, who favored supporting the export earnings of the poorest countries but opposed creating an international system to bolster commodity prices, which would hurt countries, like Germany, that imported primary commodities and did not produce them.³¹

If national positions followed national interests, lofty purposes nonetheless enveloped the pre-summit dialogue. Amid the shock of interdependence, summitry would restore "leadership and purpose" to the West, marking the transition from the hierarchical Pax Americana to a "more mature" order in which the United States would practice "shared leadership with other nations." This was Brzezinski's view, and it echoed the Trilateralists' pre-1977 prognoses. But if the Pax Americana were to be recapitulated in multilateral guise, the United States would remain the orchestrator of world order. "There is a great desire in the Western world for a restoration of confidence," Jimmy Carter confided in his diary, "and I believe that unless that confidence is derived from the strength of our country it won't be coming from any other source."³²

Confident in US primacy, Jimmy Carter undercut his negotiating position one month before the summit convened. Citing improved economic conditions, Carter in April 1977 asked Congress to rescind the personal tax rebate that had been a central component of the domestic stimulus package he had proposed in January. The move canceled one-third of Carter's \$31 billion stimulus, to the chagrin of American taxpayers and the delight of Helmut Schmidt, who could now use Carter's words and deeds against him. Retracting the rebate may have been sensible in the domestic context, but it was a misstep on the international stage. Prime Minister Fukuda of Japan asked, pointedly, what Carter's retreat from stimulus signaled for US leadership. Carter rebuffed Fukuda's suggestion that the United States had taken "a step backwards." But the issue lingered. With Schmidt holding the line for price stability, the summit achieved only an uneasy compromise between stimulatory and anti-inflationary priorities, which was the same awkward balance Carter was struggling to maintain at home. Even with the support of Britain's James Callaghan, Carter could not persuade Schmidt and Fukuda to specify formal growth targets in the summit communiqué. Instead, the leaders agreed to informal growth targets: 5 percent for Germany; 6.7 percent for Japan; and 6 percent for the United States.³³

Macroeconomic coordination was not the only contentious issue in London. Carter took a strident lead on nuclear nonproliferation, advocating the creation of an international framework to restrict the sale of uranium and the distribution of nuclear technologies to non-nuclear countries. Schmidt pushed back, expressing concern that Carter's proposals would engender "feeling[s] of discrimination" in the Third World. More than principles were at stake. Back in 1975, Germany had struck a deal with Brazil to develop enrichment and reprocessing facilities in Brazil in return for deliveries of uranium to Germany. The United States objected to the deal, not only because it might facilitate Brazil's nuclear weapons aspirations, but also because it circumscribed opportunities for US exporters and assured Germany a supply of uranium from non-US sources. Both sides, however, adopted the language of ideals: Schmidt invoked the prerogatives of sovereignty and Carter spoke for world order, illustrating how global and national purposes could be set against each other. Similar dynamics recurred over human rights, about which Carter was also strident, making "no apology for his espousal of the cause of human rights." Others, including Schmidt, preferred softer approaches and disavowed any interest in overthrowing illiberal regimes.³⁴

Despite the fractiousness, Jimmy Carter declared himself satisfied with the results of the London summit and of the two other summits timed to coincide with it: the NATO summit and the Quadripartite summit (of the four powers with interests in West Berlin) that convened in London in May 1977. "They were very productive, far beyond anything I had anticipated," he wrote. Schmidt excepted, the president struck up effective relationships with the other heads of government. "I've gotten to know the other leaders," Carter continued, "and I think we have a good relationship." Henry Owen echoed Carter's verdict. In the G-7, the Trilateralists found a framework in which world order politics could be pursued. If the Carter administration could build on the achievements at the London summit, Henry Owen believed, it would forge "a new international institution—one that brings Japan, as well as Europe and North America, more closely together in common decision and common action."³⁵

The initial exuberance soon faded. Administration officials concluded during the fall of 1977 that the London compromise was falling apart. Their concerns hinged on the macroeconomic locomotive. With Schmidt reluctant to stimulate, German growth looked to be lagging far behind its 5 percent goal. Japan appeared to be closer to its target, but exports, not domestic demand, were driving Japanese growth. This undercut the logic of the locomotive theory, which presumed that demand in the strongest countries would sustain export-led growth elsewhere. Of the strong countries, the United States was the only one "likely to meet both the numerical target and the spirit of the [London] communiqué," the only country, in other words, serving as a consumer of last resort. This had repercussions for the US balance of payments, which plunged

during 1977. It also augured disruptive policy choices in the weak countries. Through late 1977, Britain, France, and Italy “roughly” adhered to the stabilization policies that were their part of the London bargain. Without an effective international locomotive, US officials feared, the weaker countries might adopt stimulus packages of their own, worsening price inflation worldwide and exacerbating international monetary instability.³⁶

The Keynesians in the administration blamed “differential rates of growth” among the G-7 economies, but there was no disguising the fact that international trade and monetary imbalances hinged on the United States and the dollar. By the end of 1977, the US current account deficit, at \$18 billion, was three times larger than the previous year’s deficit and about half the total deficits of all the OECD countries. Not since the 1850s had the balance of trade run so hard against the United States. Until the fall, US officials had remained sanguine about the balance of payments, even as their European counterparts warned that the dollar’s decline augured “a crisis of considerable proportions.” The dwindling dollar, Schmidt argued, exacerbated inflation in Europe and encouraged oil exporters, who denominated their exports in dollars, to raise prices again. These were valid concerns, but there was minimal enthusiasm in Washington for raising domestic interest rates or restraining domestic demand to strengthen the dollar. Even for the Trilateralists, who proclaimed that global interdependence mandated national discipline, applying the macroeconomic brakes at home was harder than pushing the accelerator, which is what the locomotive concept prescribed.³⁷

Still, the dollar’s difficulties could not be wished away. US officials, including Blumenthal, began to seriously engage the dollar situation in late 1977, and Carter, in early 1978, conceded a point that the European leaders had been making for months: US trade deficits and the imploding dollar had much to do with “our heavy dependence on imported oil.” He thereby linked monetary stabilization with another issue that transcended distinctions between foreign and domestic affairs, namely, energy.³⁸



In energy policy, Carter inherited an unenviable situation. The vulnerabilities that the oil crisis of 1973–74 manifested had not abated; instead, the United States had become more dependent on foreign supply in the intervening years. Americans imported half the oil they consumed in 1977, up from 22 percent at the beginning of the 1970s. Domestic consumption was a major part of the problem. In 1977, Americans burned 18 million barrels of oil per day, almost half the oil burned by all the OECD countries combined and a third of total world oil consumption. They thus shared with OPEC special responsibility for driving the price of oil upward—from \$10, in real terms, per barrel of Saudi light crude in 1970 to \$45 in 1977. Like Gerald Ford, Carter recognized

that reducing domestic demand for oil was an international imperative; unless American consumption slackened, world prices would remain high. “The success of your energy policy in reducing U.S. dependence,” Brzezinski affirmed to Carter, “will have a significant effect on our relationship with Europe and on Europe’s internal well-being.”³⁹

Because of the decline in domestic oil production, there were no easy answers to the dilemma of energy interdependence. Some industrialized countries, such as Japan and France, had embraced nuclear energy. But Carter, who had trained as a nuclear engineer, worried about accidents and the misuse of civilian technologies for military purposes, which ensured that he would not embrace the atom as a panacea. Indeed, Carter’s eagerness to restrict the international sale of uranium and reprocessing equipment became a source of rancor within the G-7, especially with Japan. For Prime Minister Fukuda, ensuring the continuity of uranium supplies was a “life or death” issue. The controversy faded only when Carter approved the reprocessing of US-sourced uranium at Japan’s Tokai plant. A setback for nonproliferation, the spat showcased Carter’s determination to limit the spread of civilian technologies that could facilitate nuclear weapons programs, as had happened in India, which tested a fission bomb in 1974. The Tokai episode showed that world order objectives might conflict with each other—and with geopolitical goals. Restricting the spread of nuclear technologies cut against the administration’s commitment to reducing the industrialized world’s dependence on OPEC oil, raising questions about where Carter’s priorities lay.⁴⁰

Carter’s attempts to manage international energy interdependence also bred friction at home. Jim Schlesinger, Ford’s secretary of defense, whom Carter appointed as a special adviser on energy, was tasked with devising an energy program capable of mitigating international vulnerabilities. In April 1977, Carter unveiled the National Energy Plan. Borrowing a phrase from William James, the president called energy conservation the “moral equivalent of war.” Failure to act, Carter warned, “could endanger our freedom as a sovereign nation.” Two days later, Carter elaborated the plan before Congress. Besides promoting conservation, he would expand domestic oil production and, where possible, substitute alternative energy sources for oil. The key to the whole concept was pricing. Energy markets in the United States remained tightly regulated, and price controls kept the prices of domestic oil and natural gas below world levels. Raising the price of fossil fuels, Carter hoped, would leverage the market to “stimulate conservation” and make alternative fuels viable. This had been the thrust of Ford’s energy policy, too, although Carter was less willing to countenance the outright removal of price controls. While he favored higher prices, Carter was loath to let energy companies keep the profits that decontrol would reap. He instead advocated a complex system of staggered price increases that would

bring domestic oil prices up to world levels in combination with a windfall tax on corporate profits that would fund relief for poor consumers. Equitable distribution of the economic pain, Carter's team hoped, would enable the National Energy Plan to secure congressional support.⁴¹

The Democratic Party enjoyed a sizable majority in Congress, but the Carter energy plan ran into opposition in the Senate, where legislators debated the plan as a package of separate bills. In the House of Representatives, Speaker Tip O'Neill constituted a special committee to consider the plan as a single package, which the House approved in the summer of 1977. The Senate's convoluted process empowered lobbyists for the energy industry, leading Carter to remark, privately, that the "influence of the oil and gas industry" in the chamber was "unbelievable." Some progressive Democrats, meanwhile, objected to price increases on the grounds that they would hurt the Americans who could least afford it. Even the administration's rather skeptical willingness to explore nuclear power became contentious, being unpopular with environmentalists. All Congress could agree to do in 1977 was to establish a cabinet-level department, the Department of Energy, to oversee federal energy policy.⁴²

Creating the Department of Energy was an accomplishment, but Carter's core goals in energy policy remained unfulfilled. Raising oil prices remained deeply unpopular among both Republicans and Democrats in Congress. Their recalcitrance hampered foreign policy. Insofar as the United States had done "very little to limit the growth in oil demand" at home, it was difficult for US diplomats, Brzezinski warned, to pressure OPEC "to hold down prices." Meanwhile, excessive US imports of foreign oil were destabilizing the international economy, pulling down the dollar, and exacerbating price inflation; one likely result, Blumenthal warned in early 1978, would be a serious dollar crisis. "Our nation's inability to deal with so crucial a question," Carter recalled, "was becoming an international embarrassment."⁴³



The experience of 1977 exposed obstacles to the enactment of the Trilateralists' goals: informal commitments were easily forgotten; simultaneous purposes collided, as they had done on energy and nonproliferation; and domestic constituencies resisted making the sacrifices that international cooperation mandated. Meanwhile, international monetary instability and the prospect of a renewed global recession loomed. The two perils were not unrelated. The buoyancy of the US economy amid slowing foreign growth exacerbated the current account deficit, contributing to a striking decline in the dollar's effective exchange rate during 1977–78, as figure 8.1 illustrates. After the stability of the mid-1970s, it looked as if a dollar devaluation similar in magnitude to the one Nixon orchestrated in 1971–73 was unfolding. Some foreign officials suspected that the United States was trying to weaken the dollar to benefit domestic exporters, much as Nixon

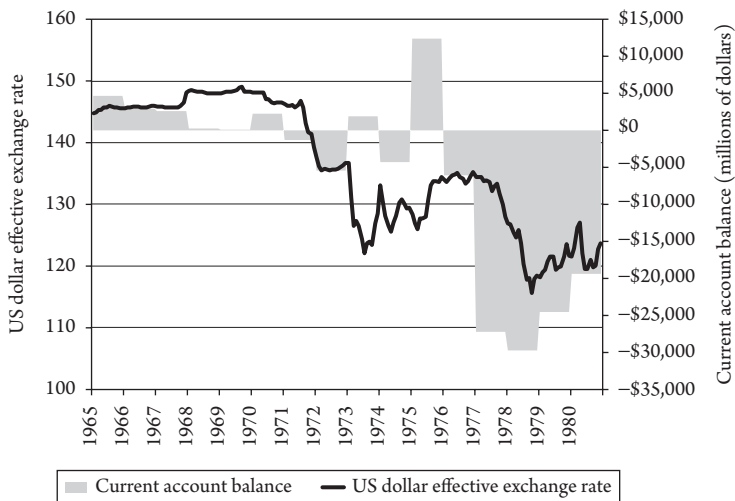


Figure 8.1 The balance of payments and the dollar, 1965–1980

Sources: BIS, Statistics; and US Bureau of the Census, Foreign Trade Statistics.

had done. This overstated the case. US officials were nonchalant about the dollar's slide throughout most of 1977, but they were taking it seriously by the year's end. In early 1978, Carter asked his advisers to keep him personally "informed and involved" with the "dollar problem."⁴⁴

For US officials, the risks of a declining dollar included another OPEC price hike, the discrediting of US economic leadership, and even "a major international financial crisis." Saudi Arabia clarified the risks when it warned the United States in early 1978 that it might begin denominating its oil exports against a basket of foreign currencies, a move that would dethrone the dollar from its dominant role in the oil trade. For treasury secretary Michael Blumenthal, whom critics had accused of "talking down the dollar" in the summer of 1977, it was now clear that "the dollar problem involves serious risks to our national security." This recognition sparked action. In the new year, the Carter administration heeded calls from Europe and initiated a program of joint intervention with the Bundesbank to support the dollar on the foreign exchange markets. It nonetheless rejected James Callaghan's proposal for a concerted effort to restore international currency stability. The British prime minister's approach, Blumenthal warned, would set the world on "a road back toward fixed exchange rates." Unwilling to impose such a "strait jacket on US domestic economic policy," the Carter administration preferred to recommit to macroeconomic coordination, arguing that faster economic growth in Europe and Japan would correct the disequilibria responsible for the dollar's slide.⁴⁵

Blumenthal and other US officials distrusted Callaghan's enthusiasm for monetary stabilization. But it was the British prime minister who in March 1978 proposed "a new act of collective leadership in the management of the world economy." Callaghan envisaged a grand bargain in which the G-7 powers would trade varied policy commitments, the result being a plan for collaborative action "across a broad front of economic policy." The priorities that Callaghan identified—macroeconomic stimulus, trade liberalization, monetary stability, and so on—were predictable, but putting them in a political framework, in which concessions would be traded, was an innovative move.⁴⁶

Since Japan had agreed in winter 1977/8 to adopt new growth targets, the central obstacle would be Germany. To overcome "the difficulty of persuading the Federal German Republic to take further action on growth," Callaghan suggested that Carter agree to reduce US oil imports in exchange for Schmidt's commitment to achieving specific growth targets. That the next G-7 summit was scheduled to convene in Bonn in July 1978 only enhanced the opportunities to extract commitments from Schmidt. Henry Owen had, in fact, already used the implicit (and improbable) threat of US nonparticipation in the summit to encourage German concessions. It also mattered that support for a change of direction in economic policy was building within Schmidt's Social Democratic Party (SPD). Organized labor and the left wing of the SPD favored pro-growth policies, which aligned them with the Anglo-American quest for stimulus.⁴⁷

Throughout the preparatory process that preceded the summit, the Carter administration defined clear goals. The centerpiece of the meeting would be "a three-way deal": the United States would act "to limit oil imports and control inflation"; Germany and Japan would implement "additional measures to stimulate domestic demand"; and all the G-7 countries would pursue "freer trade policies." Helmut Schmidt would not define a GDP growth target in advance of the summit, but he and Carter did establish the parameters of a deal. American "energy action" would be a "quid-pro-quo" for Germany "taking simulative action." This made it imperative that Congress take action to raise domestic oil prices. "Unless you are in a position to demonstrate forceful action on energy," Carter's foreign policy advisers told him, "the forthcoming Summit will be branded a failure." However, decontrolling oil prices was not a consensual commitment within the Carter administration. High-ranking advisers, including Stuart Eizenstat, the president's lead adviser on domestic affairs, opposed decontrol on the grounds that higher energy prices would be a political liability for Carter and a burden on ordinary Americans. Within the Congress, opposition to decontrol was strong. The Trilateralists nonetheless gambled that Carter's committing himself abroad would pressure the Congress into passing the domestic energy bill that represented Washington's end of the Bonn bargain.⁴⁸

“We’re getting boxed in,” Carter worried as the summit approached. “Expectations,” he feared, were “too high.” The president was correct; expectations for the Bonn summit grew so high that the media ended up registering disappointment with its results. When it came to the substance, however, the Bonn summit met the administration’s goals. The carefully prepared oil-for-stimulus deal fostered an easy and productive working atmosphere. “We feel like members of a fraternity,” Carter wrote; “we share problems and political analyses, try to understand different national perspectives, and cooperate.” This did not make authoritative global governance the summit’s purpose; rather, the G-7 sought to negotiate and, where possible, to reconcile the divergent national priorities that threatened the stability of the international economic order and the prosperity of the advanced industrial countries.⁴⁹

Evaluated in these terms, the Bonn summit was a success. Carter struck a conciliatory pose, as did his foreign interlocutors. Although Carter insisted that the weak US dollar was a consequence of anemic growth elsewhere in the world, he emphasized his commitment to fighting inflation and curbing energy consumption at home. This was enough to extract from Schmidt a commitment to pursue “additional and quantitatively substantial” stimulus measures worth about 1 percent of GNP. As he had done in London, Takeo Fukuda offered eloquent entreaties to common purpose, summoning his colleagues to transcend their “age of uncertainty.” Substantively, the Japanese prime minister’s decision to pursue 1978 growth targets that were 1.5 percent higher than the previous year’s helped to catalyze agreement, focusing pressure on Schmidt.⁵⁰

The weaker G-7 economies also played their parts: France, Italy, and Britain agreed to fight inflation and conclude the Tokyo Round of trade talks within six months. Canada reaffirmed its determination to fight inflation, and Prime Minister Trudeau provided one of the summit’s most perceptive historical analyses, inquiring whether the G-7’s predicament might not reflect the exhaustion of “the potential of the second industrial revolution.” In the summit communiqué, Carter committed the United States to reducing oil imports by approximately 2.5 million barrels per day by 1985 and to increase the domestic price of oil to world levels by the end of 1980. Schmidt, meanwhile, pledged to stimulate demand. Overall, the Bonn declaration of the G-7 was a landmark in international economic relations; having arrived through political bargaining at a “package deal,” the advanced industrial countries agreed to coordinate domestic policies in pursuit of shared prosperity and common stability.

In the short term, the participants mostly honored their commitments. The German Bundestag in fall 1978 approved a stimulus package that raised the Federal Republic’s annualized growth rate to about 4 percent. This was, as Henry Owen testified to Congress, “a substantial advantage for the countries that trade with Germany.” Japan did not quite meet its Bonn target, but it made what Owen

called “a good faith effort,” including adopting “an additional stimulus budget.” Insofar as Carter had agreed to prioritize the fight against inflation, subsequent US decisions to tighten monetary policy, Owen believed, represented “a satisfactory fulfillment of that commitment.” In the energy arena, however, Carter’s record was patchier. After Bonn, Carter wrangled much of his domestic energy program through the Congress, but the legislative package of 1978 did nothing to raise oil prices, and the issue festered into 1979. Carter would in time implement price decontrol by executive fiat, not legislative assent, in circumstances that the Iranian Revolution transformed. Honoring his Bonn pledge would prove to be politically bruising for the American president, illustrating a point Carter had made on the campaign trail. “Interdependence,” he declared back in 1975, “means mutual sacrifice.”⁵¹

The London and Bonn summits represent outstanding examples of international policy coordination. Confronting an economic crisis of transnational scope, a group of leaders hailing from the political center and center-left worked to reconcile national interests and common purposes under circumstances of interdependence and turmoil. Policy coordination, they gambled, would enable them to bolster growth and employment through the re-creation on a transnational scale of the Keynesian solutions that policymakers in the industrialized countries had followed since the Second World War. Yet they did not achieve their goals, for another oil crisis soon transformed the international economic landscape. Some critics, including Helmut Schmidt, later argued that the Anglo-American crusade for an international stimulus in 1977–78 exacerbated the West’s malaise. This is debatable. What is clear is that the summiteers were committed to preserving an open world economic order. Mindful of the 1930s, the G-7 leaders sought to keep the industrialized countries together through the cooperative production of growth. Their agenda was nostalgic in looking to restore the bountiful growth of the 1950s and 1960s, yet innovative in its bid to retool Keynesian policies for the circumstances of interdependence.⁵²

There were, of course, omissions. The summiteers at London and Bonn dealt with their own problems, not the whole world’s. Accounting for half of world trade, the G-7 countries had in common a shared industrial modernity, lofty expectations for growth and welfare, and their interdependence. Together with the other advanced economies, they consumed 73 percent of the world’s imports and produced 72 percent of its exports. Their position in the world economy was dominant, but dominance did not make the advanced economies a world unto themselves. The G-7 was “closely interdependent” with the Third World, as Valéry Giscard d’Estaing observed at Bonn. The summiteers, Giscard argued, “should not just pay lip service to relations with developing countries.” In fact, this is what they did, offering platitudes but little else.⁵³

The Bonn declaration affirmed the G-7's "shared responsibility" for international development and denounced the Communist bloc for its failure to do more for the world's poor. But Bonn produced few commitments beyond Japan's pledge to double development aid over the next two years. James Callaghan, whose concern with the Third World distinguished him within the G-7, rued that the summiteers looked "like a group of rich industrialized countries who at the end of their deliberations said that they must have a few paragraphs about the developing countries in their communiqué." This was an accurate assessment. The communiqué, however, reflected political realities within the summit countries. There was little support within the G-7 countries for increasing developmental aid, liberalizing the tariff barriers that shut Third World exporters out of the West's agricultural markets, and international schemes that would guarantee the export incomes of commodity-producing countries, such as the NIEO proposed. In the First World's parsimony toward the Third, the 1970s was truly a decade of limits.⁵⁴

Disadvantageous circumstances thus doomed Carter's North-South policy. The administration entered office in 1977 insisting that the amelioration of global inequalities was a strategic imperative, not just an ethical concern. Brzezinski argued that "the emerging political consciousness of mankind" made it incumbent on the United States to seek "social justice between peoples, individuals, and even states." "North-South relations," he proclaimed, "are the long-run problem in international politics." Here, however, advances would not come without costs—or, to be more specific, without transfers. As Cyrus Vance pointed out, foreign aid was "the single most important" thing the United States could do to improve its relations with the Third World, but congressional parsimony proved insurmountable. No matter how badly the United States needed "a comprehensive and long-term North-South strategy," there was little enthusiasm in the Congress—or elsewhere—for expanding the foreign-aid budget. Indeed, Brzezinski concluded in mid-1977 that the administration would do better to focus on political outreach to the Third World South than on economic assistance. "North-South policy," one official observed, "was an idea whose time had not yet come." In its absence, Carter's outreach hinged on engagement with individual countries, such as Panama, whose grievances over the Canal Zone he tried to resolve, and on his oftenstated but contentious commitment to human rights.⁵⁵

Making Human Rights Policy

A concern with human rights in foreign policy marked the difference between the Carter administration and its predecessors, but the old obstacles still endured. Reconciling universal aspirations to the stubborn realities of territorial

sovereignty remained a particular dilemma. The administration recognized that embracing human rights might lead some to conclude “that we are embarked on a crusade to drastically alter or topple 100-odd governments.” Carter nonetheless repudiated Kissinger’s prioritization of international order over universal justice. When the president addressed the United Nations in March 1977, he neither uttered the word “sovereignty” nor intimated it as a significant priority. Instead, he reified human rights promotion as a purpose for the United Nations—and for US foreign policy. The United States, Carter announced, would meddle in the internal affairs of foreign countries if human rights concerns warranted it doing so. This was a bold commitment and a striking departure from Washington’s previous diplomatic practice.⁵⁶

As malleable as human rights are, defining them ranked among the most urgent tasks of the administration. One approach defined human rights in terms of core civil and political rights—the “negative” rights that individuals retain against states (and that Moynihan made the centerpiece of his UN crusade). The UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, however, included not only political and civil rights but also social and economic rights, “including food, clothing, housing and medical care.” Unlike Moynihan, the Carter administration favored defining human rights in the “broadest sense.” “The point to stress,” Brzezinski noted, “is that human rights is a broad concept.” The “universal appeal” of human rights depended upon their encompassing “basic minimum standards of social and economic existence.” Thus, the administration adopted a capacious definition. Following the Universal Declaration, it included social and economic rights in its agenda, figuring that excluding them “would not only be inconsistent with our humanitarian ideals and efforts, but would also be unacceptable in the Third World.” “Our policy,” Cyrus Vance explained, “is to promote all these rights.”⁵⁷

Seeing themselves as the heirs to the natural rights revolution of Hobbes, Locke, and Jefferson, it was easy for American leaders to presume that the nation had a special relationship to the idea of human rights. The United States was not, however, on the cutting edge of international human rights law. In particular, the two UN human rights covenants of 1966—the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights—still lacked American signatures. Envisaged as early as 1948, the covenants promised to transform the Universal Declaration’s aspirations into binding international law. Carter, in October 1977, signed both documents. In doing so, he aimed to transcend Cold War controversies over the meaning of human rights and to commit the United States to multilateral human rights enforcement. He nonetheless lacked the power to affix more than his own signature, for ratification of the treaties required the Senate’s assent. Amnesty International, the International Commission of Jurists, and the International

League for Human Rights urged Congress to approve the treaties—and the White House to push hard for ratification—describing the two covenants as “essential to progress in protecting human rights.” Louis Henkin, an eminent human rights lawyer, wrote that Senate ratification “would move the United States into the mainstream of the international human rights movement.” The treaties nonetheless languished in committee.⁵⁸

Without Senate ratification of the 1966 covenants, human rights would remain in the arena of foreign policy, as distinct from the realm of international law. Here, human rights would have to be balanced against parallel priorities, but Carter worked from the outset to elevate their prioritization. Besides appointing Patricia Derian to coordinate human rights policy at the State Department, the administration hired Jessica Tuchman Mathews to lead an NSC staff cluster dealing “with human rights and the range of problems that cut across traditional foreign policy areas.” Beyond staff appointments, the Carter administration established machinery to coordinate human rights policy across the foreign-policy bureaucracies. Overseas embassies were required to designate “human rights officers” who would have “frank discussions” with foreign officials and meet with the victims of human rights abuses. At Brzezinski’s suggestion, an interagency human rights group was established in the spring of 1977 under the chairmanship of Warren Christopher, Vance’s deputy. The primary task of the Christopher committee would be to vet the allocation of US development aid, multilateral as well as bilateral, on human rights grounds.⁵⁹

Though its purpose was to regularize policy across the regional bureaus, the Christopher committee proceeded on an ad hoc basis, which was not conducive to defining overarching standards. One NSC staffer reported feeling “uneasy” about the absence of clear guidelines for denying aid on human rights grounds. Nor did the interagency committee resolve the bureaucratic turf wars: by mid-1978, Jessica Matthews was complaining that Christopher was “making all the decisions himself.” There were also limits to the committee’s reach. It did not, for the most part, evaluate military assistance programs; these were determined at higher levels. Still, the bureaucratic innovations of 1977 were a marker of shifting priorities. Whereas Kissinger’s State Department had resisted congressional efforts to inject human rights into foreign policy, Carter’s embraced human rights as its own cause.⁶⁰

The executive branch’s conversion to human rights did not end the skirmishes with the Congress. In early 1977, Tom Harkin, an Iowa Democrat, slipped a human rights amendment into a piece of House legislation appropriating funds for the Inter-American Development Bank. It required the executive branch to vote against loan applicants whenever the prospective borrowers were proven abusers of human rights. After this success, Herman Badillo, a Harkin ally from New York, introduced legislation in April that would make US votes in

international financial institutions (IFIs) contingent upon borrowers not engaging in persistent human rights violations. This was a bold move. Badillo believed that tying financial aid to human rights would establish a structural check on human rights abuses, to be applied worldwide and without discretion. Some of Badillo's detractors accused him of leveraging a source of structural power in the world economy to promote an ideological agenda; others condemned his encroachment on executive prerogatives. Fearing that Badillo's amendment would provoke adverse reactions in the Third World and recognizing that it obliterated the president's "negotiating flexibility," the Carter administration opposed the initiative and supported an alternative Senate bill that preserved diplomatic flexibility. Badillo and his allies nonetheless succeeded, and the IFI legislation became "the high-water mark of legislative initiative to require human rights tests on all forms of foreign aid." Tasked with implementing the law, the Carter administration struggled to preserve flexibility amid rigid mandates.⁶¹

From the administration's perspective, rigid sanctions were unsuited to a world in which sovereign prerogatives precluded universal law, and even close NATO allies distrusted Carter's human rights commitments. Flexibility, moreover, enabled the White House to promise rewards—such as IFI loans—to encourage foreign governments to improve their human rights standards. "We should be alert," administration officials noted, "to the potential benefits of using the 'carrot' as well as the 'stick.'" Still, the utility of flexibility did not obviate the need for overarching standards. Administration diplomats complained during 1977 about the absence of clear guidance about what constituted human rights violations and, more fundamentally, as to what Carter's policy was. In the absence of presidential instructions, Cyrus Vance's April 1977 speech on human rights to the University of Georgia Law School became the *de facto* reference point. Meanwhile, the Carter administration worked to formulate a set of general precepts, which became the first comprehensive executive-branch statement on human rights.⁶²

In May 1977, the White House issued a presidential review memorandum (PRM) on human rights in foreign policy. The Christopher committee coordinated the drafting of the eighty-five-page paper, known as PRM-28, which provided the basis for a subsequent presidential directive (PD) on human rights, PD-30, in early 1978. These documents, which Carter edited himself, presumed a capacious, threefold definition of human rights, including "basic economic and social rights," bodily "integrity," and "civil and political liberties." To promote these rights in the international arena, PD-30 proposed using "the full range" of "diplomatic tools" from discrete bilateral suasion to public denunciation of violators.⁶³

Whereas the congressional enthusiasts favored sanctions, Carter envisaged making use of "positive inducements" to reward countries that improved

upon tawdry records. Doing so, the administration hoped, might enable it to steer social and political development in foreign countries in a positive direction. Indeed, PD-30 avowed that the “primary emphasis” of US policy would be on “longer term trends,” not specific manifestations of brutality. The Carter directives thus suggested that the most useful role the United States could play would be to massage progressive historical change rather than express principled outrage wherever the specter of abuse appeared. If the agenda seemed cautious, even conservative, it reflected both Zbigniew Brzezinski’s preoccupation with large-scale historical processes and Carter’s wariness of blanket assertions of moral superiority. “Our own ideals in the area of human rights,” Carter admitted at the United Nations, “have not always been attained in the United States.”⁶⁴

As vexing as defining human rights could be, the cause was popular. Congress embraced Carter’s human rights commitments, the skirmishes over the IFI issue notwithstanding. Some fifty-seven senators co-signed a letter saluting Carter’s stand, while Donald Fraser defended Carter against the charge that his policy constituted “interference” in the affairs of foreign nations. Public opinion was also supportive. One poll conducted in late May 1977 found overwhelming support, even when human rights were set against other important goals, such as nuclear arms control. “Particularly striking,” the pollster concluded, was the fact that support for Carter’s human rights policy “was broad-based, cutting across all traditional lines of party, age, region, and social class.” Another survey, conducted by the pollster Pat Caddell, reported that voters defined human rights as their number one priority in foreign policy—24 percent calling human rights their top priority, as compared with 18 percent for US–Soviet relations. Surveys in other industrial democracies also revealed broad support. In France, Japan, Britain, Canada, and West Germany, the United States Information Agency reported, “the President’s statements on human rights have struck a responsive chord among the more informed public.” “The human rights policy,” diplomat Anthony Lake concluded in January 1978, “may be the best thing this Administration has going for it.”⁶⁵

Still, it was easier to embrace human rights in the abstract than to advance the cause in specific contexts, where human rights might conflict with other goals and purposes. Many of the non-Communist governments that NGOs targeted were regimes the United States had nurtured. Indonesia, Iran, and South Korea were proven violators, but they were also close allies in rough neighborhoods. The People’s Republic of China had a woeful human rights record (which the NGOs did little to excavate). China, however, remained a pivot point on which Cold War geopolitics turned. In these cases, human rights faced uphill struggles. The principles might be noble, but American diplomats, unlike the NGOs, would have to weigh human rights against other priorities. Thus, while Carter wanted to strike a balance that was quite different from Kissinger’s, the tradeoffs

between human rights and competing priorities endured, as did the countervailing claims of sovereignty.



In Latin America, the 1970s were a bleak time for human rights. Right-wing authoritarianism was ascendant, and Cold War polarization and the ideological claims of “national security doctrine” propelled the region’s antidemocratic trends. With Washington’s support, the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay had in 1975 initiated Operation Condor, a transnational campaign of repression against the left. While the Soviet Union and Cuba provided succor to Latin America’s revolutionary forces, it was the counter-revolutionaries who institutionalized state terror. Still, Latin America’s military regimes chased order, not isolation, and their interest in preserving ties to the international community made them more susceptible to human rights activism than were closed societies like Cambodia and North Korea. For NGOs like Amnesty International and for human rights proponents in the US Congress, Latin America became a focus of inquiry and activism. Latin Americans were themselves active participants in the politics of human rights. Few nation-states were more supportive of human rights than Costa Rica, which championed the idea of a UN Commissioner for Human Rights, while antiregime activists in Argentina embraced international human rights as a tactic for resisting the junta in Buenos Aires. All this made Latin America a central priority for the Carter administration’s human rights policy.⁶⁶

Even as he prioritized human rights, Carter sought broad improvement in US relations with Latin America. Repudiating the Monroe Doctrine as an “imperialistic legacy,” the administration sought to put relations “on a more normal footing.” The days of “regional policy,” were over, the administration declared; Washington would henceforth treat Latin America’s republics as sovereign states with diverse interests, not as imperial protectorates. Central to this approach were the Panama Canal treaties of 1977, which committed the United States to restoring Panamanian sovereignty over the Canal Zone, a US overseas territory since 1903. Returning the Canal Zone was for Carter an ethical imperative; the president believed that Washington had “cheated the Panamanians out of their canal” in the first place. With the support of Ford, Kissinger, and other luminaries, Carter negotiated two treaties with Omar Torrijos of Panama that returned the Canal Zone to Panama, and then expended a great deal of political capital pushing them through Congress. Doing so attested to Carter’s seriousness about improving US-Latin American relations, which meant working with the leaders of existing regimes, to whom Carter signaled his “high regard” for sovereignty. These leaders were not, by and large, a liberal group. Torrijos was by Carter’s own admission a “military dictator,” but Carter did not use the canal treaties as an opportunity to force human rights on him. Returning the Canal was a triumph,

but the episode suggested that diplomatic engagement and human rights were not synonymous objectives; one entailed working with existing regimes, the other against them.⁶⁷

Similar tensions manifested in the Southern Cone, where the Carter administration distanced itself from Kissinger's policy, which had condoned the repression of anti-regime forces. Since the 1973 coup that brought it to power, the Pinochet regime in Chile had become proficient in the practices of arbitrary detention, torture, and political murder. In the scale of its political violence, however, Argentina far eclipsed Chile. Thanks to Amnesty International and other NGOs, the misdeeds of the Argentine junta that seized power in March 1976 were widely publicized in the United States.⁶⁸

Eager to take a stand, Cyrus Vance, at the June 1977 meeting of the OAS (Organization of American States), introduced a resolution declaring that "there are no circumstances which justify torture, summary executions, or prolonged detention without trial." A host of Caribbean and Central American nations sided with Washington, as the Southern Cone fought back, rallying behind the banner of sovereignty and turning the OAS meeting in Grenada into "a battleground for the US human rights policy." The debate became more heated as Carter escalated from gestures to actions. Within a few months of taking office, he prohibited the delivery of diverse military items to Argentina and Uruguay. Similar restrictions would later be imposed on Brazil, Paraguay, and several Central American countries. The value of US military sales and grants to Chile fell from \$347 million in 1976 to just \$18 million in 1980. Deliveries to Argentina fell from \$294 million to \$125 million over the same period. This was consequential, if incremental, change.⁶⁹

Evaluating the impact of Carter's human rights policy in Latin America, the CIA in 1978 found "encouraging signs of progress," especially in Chile, but acknowledged wide disparities. There would, however, be no victory to declare. The most that could be said was that the scale of human rights violations diminished between 1977 and 1981. How much of this improvement owed to US influence was hard to say; even the State Department would not hazard a guess. Nor was it clear what costs the United States had paid for pushing human rights. "We cannot know," concluded the State Department's Tony Lake, "what price we might one day pay for the deterioration in our once close military relationships with Brazil and Argentina." What was clear was that Latin America was the principal "theater" for Carter's human rights policy. By January 1978, the United States had opposed on human rights grounds twenty-two IFI loans to Latin America, seven to Africa, and only four to East Asia. This did not mean the plight of human rights was worse in Latin America than elsewhere. Rather, it implied that abuses were more legible to US policymakers here than in other contexts and that the countervailing costs "to other American interests" were calculated to be lower than elsewhere.⁷⁰

Across the Pacific, South Korea was a vexing case. A ward of US military power since the Korean War, South Korea's human rights record took a turn for the worse after Park Chung Hee imposed martial law in 1972 and persecuted the pro-democracy activists who clustered in South Korea's labor movement and in its Christian churches. Nixon and Kissinger had sided with the state, but others rallied behind South Korea's civil society. An Amnesty International mission to Seoul in 1975 indicted the regime's torture of political opponents and its harassment of lawyers. The US Congress held hearings on human rights in South Korea in 1975. Korea looked like an ideal case for the application of Carter's human rights policy, and the Carter administration voted against IFI loans on human rights grounds and made quiet appeals to South Korean officials, which helped to secure improvement in the treatment of dissidents.⁷¹

There were, however, limits to Carter's activism in Korea. He would not denounce Seoul in public, evidently for fear of destabilizing the regime. When Carter met with Park Chung Hee in the summer of 1979 the major issue between them was the prospect of US troop withdrawals, which Carter was seeking for fiscal and military reasons. The US president nonetheless seized the opportunity to press the case for human rights, advising Park that he attached "extreme importance" to the issue and intimating that US public opinion would not support military commitments unless Seoul improved its human rights record. But Carter established no formal linkage between human rights and military assistance, and the United States kept troops in South Korea even as the human rights situation deteriorated after the December 1979 assassination of President Park. When Park's successor, Chun Doo Hwan, launched a bloody assault on pro-democracy demonstrators in Kwangju in May 1980, the Carter administration refused to mediate, signaling tacit approval. When the stability of a pro-American regime was at stake, human rights would have to take a back seat, especially as Cold War tensions resurged in the last years of the 1970s.⁷²

Iran also ranked among the "most difficult" human rights cases. In 1977, it was the world's second largest oil exporter and the dominant pillar of Washington's security strategy in the Persian Gulf. Mohammed Resa Pahlavi, Iran's shah, was a top-down modernizer and a voracious consumer of US military exports. At home, he ran a one-party state, which relied on its secret police, the SAVAK, to suppress opponents—secular liberals, revolutionary leftists, and a growing Islamist movement. Iran's human rights record became in the mid-1970s the focus of broad international concern. The International Commission of Jurists dispatched a mission to study Iran's legal system, and other NGOs worked to publicize Tehran's abuses. Western newspapers were fixated on the SAVAK and its grisly methods. Testifying to the US Congress, the poet and dissident Reza Baraheni described rape, kidnapping, and executions. "In exceptional cases,"

Baraheni recalled, “a hot iron rod is put into one side of the face to force its way to the other side.”⁷³

Still, the shah was a close ally, and US decision-makers had long declined to poke at his regime’s underbelly. The Carter administration could not demur so easily; at stake was the legitimacy of its human rights policy. “Allies such as Korea, Iran, and the Philippines,” Carter’s PRM-28 exercise concluded in 1977, “cannot be immune from some applicability of the policy without endangering the integrity of our policy.” Still, the shah’s economic power and military clout ensured that the opportunities for imposing human rights on Tehran would be limited.⁷⁴

The administration tried to nudge the shah but refrained from using the kinds of pressure that it applied to Latin America’s juntas. A complex man who craved foreign approbation, Pahlavi had in fact initiated a liberalization process before Carter’s inauguration. He may have hoped that reform would stabilize his regime; he may also have sought to preempt Carter’s criticism. Regardless, the reproaches came fast after Carter’s inauguration. Echoing the human rights NGOs, the Carter administration tried “to remonstrate with the shah concerning his human rights derelictions.” When Cyrus Vance visited Teheran in May 1977, he emphasized the importance that the president attached to the issue. From the shah’s perspective, however, it appeared that Carter’s human rights policy was limited to entreaties. There was no suggestion of making military sales conditional upon reforms, as Washington did elsewhere. When Pahlavi proposed purchasing seven AWACS planes equipped with state-of-the art surveillance and communications equipment, the administration rallied behind his request. In Iran, unlike in Latin America, the geopolitical stakes were too high for human rights to be an overriding consideration. Carter broached the human rights issue himself, but Pahlavi told him that Iran’s harsh political laws were “designed to combat communism.” While Pahlavi’s regime had been in key respects Washington’s creation, the shah proved oblivious to Carter’s entreaties on human rights.⁷⁵

For all the difficulties, there were modest improvements in Iran’s human rights record during 1977, for which the administration quietly claimed credit. That the shah had released political prisoners, opened trials to the public, and permitted the Red Cross to visit his jails owed in part, US officials concluded, to pressure from Washington. The claim would be difficult to substantiate; what is clear is that the shah oscillated between reform and repression, unsure which would assure the survival of his embattled regime. Despite its limited influence, the Carter administration became popularly associated in Iran with the cause of reform. Presuming that “the more liberal approach” that Pahlavi followed in 1977 had been “forced on the shah by US pressure,” the shah’s secular opponents stepped up their protests. Carter’s human rights crusade may thus

have exacerbated Iran's political crisis, which intensified during 1977 and 1978. Despite the absence of direct sanctions, such as restrictions on military sales, Carter's rhetorical attentiveness to human rights, combined with the engagement of NGOs, such as Amnesty International and the International Commission of Jurists, helped to persuade the shah's more liberal critics that the United States was on their side.⁷⁶

When Pahlavi visited Carter in November 1977, crowds of demonstrators, many of them Iranian students, surrounded the White House, prompting the police to deploy tear gas. The Iranian opposition was rising. Underlying the shah's demise were the economic inequalities that oil wealth, economic modernization, and enduring poverty produced; an Islamist opposition that rallied around Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shi'a cleric whom Pahlavi had exiled in 1964; and the fundamental illegitimacy of a regime that originated in a coup d'état and relied thereafter on violent repression to sustain itself. The Iranian Revolution nonetheless unfolded in the context of globalization: petrodollars had exacerbated income inequality and social instability in Iran, while the Ayatollah Khomeini utilized modern media, especially cassette tapes, to disseminate his sermons and his anti-Pahlavi message. With Khomeini leading the revolution from Paris, it gained momentum in the last months of 1978. Popular demonstrations clogged Iran's streets in November and December, as millions of Iranians mobilized in opposition to the shah's rule.⁷⁷

Watching the unfolding events with discomfort, Carter's foreign policy advisers were bemused and divided. Cyrus Vance argued that the United States should persuade the shah to persevere with reform. Brzezinski, believing that the opportunity for reform had passed, favored encouraging the shah to impose military rule. Carter worried that the shah was prevaricating. "He is not a strong leader," the US president wrote, being "very doubtful and unsure of himself." Much the same could have been said, in that moment, of the makers of US foreign policy. In contrast to the events of 1953, US officials were spectators to the regime change of 1978–79. His reign now untenable, the shah decided in mid-January to abandon Iran, leaving the civilian government of Shapour Bakhtiar to persevere as best it could. Two weeks later, Khomeini returned to the country. Bakhtiar soon departed, to be replaced by Medhi Bazargan, a liberal but for now a Khomeini ally. On April 1, 1979, Iran declared itself an Islamic Republic. This sealed the fate of the Iranian monarchy. The effects of its demise would reverberate all over the world.⁷⁸

Although Henry Kissinger blamed Carter's "vocal policy" for "developments in Iran," the diplomacy of human rights does not explain the Iranian Revolution. Carter's policy neither determined nor sealed the shah's fate, but it shaped events, as Pahlavi would himself argue in the bitter memoir that he wrote from exile. Conditioned by the 1953 coup to emphasize—and exaggerate—foreign

influences on national politics, the Iranian opposition perceived, in the revolution's early stages, that the Carter administration was pushing the shah to reform before concluding, in its last months, that Washington was encouraging the shah to repress. The effect was to encourage the revolution and then to estrange the revolutionaries from the United States. Iran thus bore out a point that foreign policy analyst Earl Ravenal made: "If we are serious about the principle of human rights, we have to expect some nasty policy consequences." This was a fair point, even if specifying the downside costs was an exercise in speculative conjecture.⁷⁹

Others were more charitable. David Hawk, a former executive director of AI USA, credited Carter's policy with bringing about improvements in a number of countries, including Argentina and Chile, and with making "the world more aware of human rights." A pragmatist, Hawk recognized that human rights vied with rival priorities in the making of foreign policy, but he conceded that this jockeying was "better than having it as not a factor at all." The International League for Human Rights credited Carter with making human rights "a subject of national policy debate in many countries [and] the focus for discussion in international organizations." These were judicious verdicts: they lauded Carter for raising the profile of human rights but acknowledged that he led the world's dominant superpower—not an NGO with nuclear missiles.⁸⁰

The lack of consistency was nonetheless vexing. The administration tried to ensure "that human rights were based on principle," but making human rights "applicable to all nations" was easier said than done, as the cases of Iran and South Korea indicate. Other blind spots included East Timor, where the administration disregarded Indonesia's suppression of the Timorese nationalist movement even as it worked to secure the release of Indonesian political prisoners, and Cambodia, where Carter criticized the genocidal Pol Pot regime but would not go so far as to impose sanctions upon it. Making human rights an element of foreign policy mandated the accommodation of ideals to reality, which circumscribed their application. This made it hard to sustain human rights as the lodestar of foreign policy, as they were in the administration's initial strategic concept. Not the "soul of our foreign policy" as Carter intended, human rights became an ethical accoutrement, more relevant in some cases than others. Then there was the case of the Soviet Union.⁸¹